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Sodium cyanide leak kills Dolores River fish

MONTROSE — Litigation is now being considered by the Colorado Department of Health and the Colorado Division of Wildlife following the deaths of hundreds of fish in the Dolores River. The deaths were caused by the accidental release of 3,000-5,000 gallons of sodium cyanide by the Rico-Argentine mine Sunday, August 11.

According to Fred Hinman, Southwest district engineer for the Department of Health, the state has already placed a \$4,500 price tag on the fish lost and may also fine the company for the illegal discharge. Hinman added that the company has already agreed to pay for the wildlife damage and said that settlement out of court appears to be possible. He added that the company has taken measures to prevent another such accident.

The accident occurred in a crushed rock pile from which the company is extracting silver. A sodium cyanide solution is sprayed on the tailings which is suppose to leech through the pile and seep out the sides at the lower end where it is collected

and the silver (in solution) recovered.

However, according to general manager O. L. Jahnke, the sodium cyanide solution hit a layer of material which blocked the leaching process. The solution backed up at the upper end of the pile and flowed out and down into the Dolores River.

The first signs of trouble were observed by fishermen Sunday morning. According to Frederic Thomas, Montezuma County sanitarian, the fishermen reported the fish were "just dancing on their tails trying to get out of the water." The Dolores county sheriff's office was informed of the fishermen's observations and alerted local health officials.

The local water companies, which include Dolores and Montezuma county, were told to shut off their intake valves which are located about 40 miles downstream from the mine.

By Monday the Department of Health had determined that sodium cyanide was cause of the die-off. It was determined at that time that the water system intake valves could be reopened as the level of pollution had

passed the danger point.

According to Division of Wildlife fish biologist Bill Weller, the river should recover by next year. He said the Division has already transplanted catchable rainbows in the segment affected and is planning to transplant smaller sized fish next week.

Jahnke told the Herald that the company has already taken precautions to prevent a similar occurrence from happening again. Among the measures taken is the raising of the protective berms around the pile so that if another impervious layer blocks the seepage, the outflow will be contained.

Rico-Argentine will act to correct damage to river

Action is being taken by the Rico - Argentine Mining Co. to repair the pond which "blew out" Aug. 11 and sent 3,000 to 5,000 gallons of sodium cyanide down the Dolores River.

Rico - Argentine also intends to pay for the immediate re-stocking of the Dolores River where fish were killed by the pollution.

A report from Montezuma County Health Department officials to the Montezuma and Dolores county commissioners said that O. L. Jahnke, manager of the Rico operations, has announced he will take the following actions:

1. Raise the west berm at the failed pond by three feet.
2. Raise the north berm by two feet.
3. Strip the stockpile leach bed to a depth below that of the blowout and replace it with new material.
4. Improve, reroute and deepen the river channel to move it away from the toe of the berm and rip - rap the face of the berm six inches

above the existing water level to prevent erosion by flood waters.

5. Pay for the immediate re-stocking of the river over the affected area.

The failure of the leaching process at the Rico - Argentine facilities at Rico came about 8 a.m. Sunday, Aug. 11.

This "blowout" dumped the sodium cyanide solution into the river, killing fish for about 15 miles downstream.

Alarmed because the towns of Dolores, Cortez and Dove Creek all get their water supplies from the Dolores River,

officials notified these communities about 5 p.m. The intakes were shut off at the river.

It wasn't know until Monday what the character and extent of the pollution were until Fred Hinman of the Colorado State Health Department talked with Jahnke.

A survey was made of the damage and samples taken of the water and then Hinman told the cities of Cortez and Dolores that it was safe to open their intake works, which they did at noon on Monday.